

## **The "Snail Mail" Planning Process Summary**

**Contact:** Valerie Mundt  
Tanana Chiefs Conference Planning & Development Department  
122 First Avenue, Suite 600  
Fairbanks, AK 99701  
**Phone:** 907-452-8251 x3181  
**Email:** vmundt@tananachiefs.org

### **Introduction**

The Tanana Chiefs Conference (TCC,) created in 1971 under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA,) represents the largest geographic planning region for Indian Tribes in the U.S. With 43 villages, occupying 1/6 the size of the US, and 1/3 the size of the state of Alaska, it is virtually impossible, without unmanageable cost, to gather everyone together to conduct strategic planning. All tribes have village councils, some with their own planning committees, many affiliated with incorporated cities, and some with their own for-profit corporations. Add to that, TCC is divided into 6-subregional offices, and directs the activities of over fifteen departments and the regional health care system with over 45 departments and many regional clinics. To complicate matters further, every village is represented by Doyon, Ltd., a for-profit organization also created under ANSCA, that owns one of the critical factors of production - the land and natural resources found on the land in the region. Almost all other "private" land on which development could occur is held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, one more entity to consider when planning.

### **Snail Mail at Work**

Given the region's vast area, TCC's Planning Department was faced with developing a planning system that would enables all stakeholders in the region to speak with each while creating a cohesive, dynamic, strategic plan. This was especially challenging in light of the fact that none of the tribal governments in the area had Internet accessibility (unless using long distance connectivity charges), and only 6 villages have road access. Snail mailed seemed to be the only feasible solution.

The planning effort began with the basic premise that sovereign village governments create economic prosperity (development) by using the communities assets to satisfy the needs (and if possible, the wants) of their people, while simultaneously building

assets for future generations. Since communities world-wide have the same four factors of production from which to build, planning began by sending a "snail mail" questionnaire to all village councils, city governments, government agencies in each of the village areas, and TCC department heads, with an explanation about the planning process, the reason the information was needed, and how the results would be compiled and distributed. Information about the factors of production sought included:

#### Population and labor force

How many able-bodied village residents are unemployed, and of what age? How many unemployed, elderly, youth, disabled? How many employed and at what kind of functions, labor (type), management, clerical, etc.? How many people live in the village of various age groups? How many people have credentialed education - of what type, i.e., vocational (type), high school or equivalent, college (what level.)? What traditional skills does your work force have, by age, and number in age group?

#### Natural Resources

What natural metals or minerals were known historically to be in your area, is any of it mapped? Are there forests, what types of trees, are they accessible by water or trails? Are your forestlands mapped? What types of natural foods are in your area, game, fish, berries, vegetation, quantities, and accessibility? What water supplies are available in your area, accessibility? How do people in your area feel about developing natural resources, cutting trees (with or without reforestation), fishing for sport, gardening/farming, mining, etc.? What does your village have that the rest of the world needs or wants and could your village provide it economically enough to be competitive?

#### Capital Base

What is the principal source of income for the village, how large is it, what do you do with it? Do you have investments, what type? What is the most dominant, next dominant, least dominant source of income for village members? What is the high, low, most dominant salary range for village residents? How many businesses are there with 1-5 employees, 6-10, etc.? What is their beginning pay-average pay? What assets does the village own, buildings, equipment, (age, condition, estimated market value, current use).

#### Entrepreneurial Interests

How many people in your village would like to start a business of their own, what type, where, do they have experience in that business? What has prevented them from starting the business, i.e., knowledge, money, energy, age, etc.? If whatever is preventing them from starting the business could be overcome, would they start the

business, how many hours a week would they be willing to dedicate to it, what personal assets do they think they could invest in it, what would they do if they succeeded, failed? Of those that would start a business, do they think they could succeed in their village? How do they define success?

While the information is not yet completely gathered and compiled, when it is TCC will not only know the strengths and weaknesses of each village, including knowing what we do not yet know, but also the strengths and weakness of the entire region.

The next step, after compiling the information and returning it to each village for comments (and if necessary, corrections), is to send a questionnaire that analyzes the social and economic challenges in each village - in short:

Needs. Needs are "essential" goods and services, including things that sustain life, i.e., food, shelter, warmth (a big factor in Alaska), clean water, clean air, health and life saving services. What is the village "need" priority?

- Wants. What are things that make lifestyle easier, and include items like "better than essential services" (i.e., indoor plumbing), cultural centers, formalized education, etc. What is the village priority of wants?
- How will the village look in 50 years? Has it grown? why? shrunk? why? is the Athabascan language still spoken? Understood? are the cultural values intact? recorded? is the community a good, safe place to live?

By compiling the asset list with the village prioritized "need" and "want" list, it will become clear how the available assets must be used to satisfy the needs and then the wants in each community. Once the data is compiled, a volunteer steering committee will be organized including interested individuals from each village, city, government agency, and TCC department. The committee's first function will be to develop prioritization criteria, and then to prioritize the "need" and "want" list regionally. The steering committee will have four sub-committees, including a 1) a human resource development committee - whose mission is region-wide capacity building, 2) a natural resource development and conservation committee, 3) a capital acquisition and development committee, and 4) an entrepreneurial development committee to organize individual/village entrepreneurial capacity and equity building.

As village and/or region-wide "needs" or "wants" projects percolate to the top of the priority list, interested members of the appropriate steering committee will form a village, a multi-village, or a regional task force to address the manner in which a need or want will be met. Some task forces may turn into standing committees themselves. For example, reducing the cost of heating, village-by-village or region-wide, may take several years and may involve a series of solutions. The committee that begins working to solve the problem will have to set the goals and objectives and oversee the projects that actually resolve the challenge, while capacity building and asset building in the process.

The Planning Department assists by compiling and disseminating material which builds steering committee expertise, by facilitating conference calls and minute distribution to all stakeholders, by "making the wheel turn" if it slows, by finding ways to celebrate successes, by finding experts when additional information is needed, by assisting with feasibility studies and technical assistance, and continuing to conduct annual reviews of each village to measure economic progress and to assist committees with the work of prioritizing emerging need and want projects.

In the end, economic development must accomplish community building or the process is a hollow effort and the results are non-sustainable. Economic development must not only include the community in the planning process, but must set in motion a "system" whereby solution development and execution is accomplished by the citizens whose lives are effected by the plan. Sovereignty can only actualize when a community takes ownership of its own assets and challenges and finds it within themselves to execute the solutions. Economic development is a process. However, it is the process through which sovereignty is finally lived.